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East meets west

Chinese Navy makes historic Pearl Harbor port visit

by JO1 Robert Benson

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PEARL HARBOR, HAWAII -- History was made March 9 when three People's Republic of China (PRC) Navy ships arrived here for a four-day visit.

The arrival marked the first time Chinese Navy ships pulled into an American port since the training ship Zheng He made a bicentennial port call here in 1989.

About 300 guests - a majority from the local Chinese community - attended the arrival ceremony, which included music from the Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet Band (who played national anthems of both countries), comments from Adm. Archie Clemins, CINCPACFLT, Vice Adm. Yongguo Wang, Commander, South Seas Fleet, People's Republic of China, and other high-ranking visitors.

"Today's visit marks a major milestone in Chinese and American relations," said Clemins. "These three ships are the first Chinese ships to visit Hawaii in eight years, and they will be the first Chinese ships to ever visit San Diego. In today's visit, our navies are entering a new era of peace and cooperation. Sailors around the world share a unique bond. Although we come from different backgrounds and cultures, we share a common sense of love of country and respect for the sea."

"This common bond gives a unique perspective as we come together to interact, build on our friendship and further the cause of peace," he continued.

Clemins also spoke of the political relationship the two countries share. "With 56 billion dollars of trade between us, China and the United States have a shared stake in maintaining peace and stability throughout the region. But our ties go deeper than economics. Today

there are over two million Americans from Chinese ancestry in the United States, which gives us strong emotional ties as well. That unique facet of our relationship is very apparent today with the large turnout of the Chinese Hawaii community."

Throughout the admiral's comments, strict discipline prevailed as Chinese sailors "stood by," silently manning the rails of all three ships.

That rigidity wavered slightly when Wang spoke. His enthusiasm moved the sailors and the Chinese greeters alike.

"After eight years we have come again!" exclaimed Wang, speaking through an interpreter. "The purpose of this visit is to increase the understanding between our two armed forces. We really hope the Pacific Ocean will be a bond to join the two nations.

"I believe we will come further in deepening our ties, enhancing trust, and promoting the development of friendly relations through extensive contacts between officers and men from both countries," he said. "I wish for continued development of the friendship between the two peoples, the two omniforces, and the two navies."

Other high-ranking visitors and greeters spoke at length of the friendship between the two countries and of the significance of this rare port call.

Throughout the formal ceremony, greeters waved small American and Chinese flags at the 230-man crew from Harbin, the 280-man crew of Shuhai (DDG 166) and the 280-man Nancang (AO 953).

One flag waver, Anita Wong, brought a group of 30-greeters with her. Wong is president of the U.S./China People's Friendship Association.

"This visit is very historical - very, very historical - for the U.S.," she said. "We've never had anything on a scale like this before. We've been trying to better the relations between the U.S. and China on a people to people basis. For the past two weeks we have been doing a lot of planning, coming up with activities during their stay."

A series of cultural activities and exchanges are planned including soccer, basketball and volleyball matches between the two navies, a sports picnic, reciprocal ship tours, a combined Navy band concert, and numerous sightseeing tours for the Chinese sailors.

"This is a beautiful place," said Harbin's medical officer in halting English. "I've been to America once before, five years ago, but never to Hawaii. I look forward to shopping and sightseeing and just looking around. We will also play the sports."

"This is a first for me," said another Harbin Sailor through an interpreter. "We will spend our four days here having fun, and doing many different things. It's too bad our stay is so short."

Harbin, Nancang and Zhuhai will also visit San Diego, Mexico, Peru and Chile during this deployment.

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